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STATE FOR SCA/CEN (PERRY), SCA/PPD, EUR/ACE

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SUBJECT: COORDINATOR ADAMS MEETING WITH CENTRAL ELECTIONS COMMITTEE
CHAIRMAN GARRYEV

REF: ASHGABAT 117

Summary

1. (SBU) Assistance coordinator Tom Adams and Central Elections Commission Chairman Myrat Garryev discussed Turkmenistan's February 11 presidential elections in an hour-long meeting January 31. Garryev, who was mostly affable and responsive, began to bristle when Adams offered USG technical assistance to help Turkmenistan attain internationally accepted standards in future elections. However, he said Turkmenistan would be open to U.S. observations and suggestions after the election. END SUMMARY.

Elections "Unprecedented"....

2. (SBU) Garryev welcomed the visitors, noting that they had arrived "at a very difficult time for us." He then briskly explained how the six current candidates for Turkmenistan's presidency -- one from each of its five welayats and from Ashgabat -- were selected by plenary vote of the Halk Maslahaty's 2507 delegates out of the total of 11 names considered on December 26. Noting that each candidate had a distinct, different background and professional specialty, he volunteered that "the president has to know all trades." (Comment: The garrulous Garryev clearly was singling out acting president Berdimuhammedov, the candidate with the most experience at the national level. End Comment)

3. (U) The fact of multiple candidates in a presidential election was unprecedented for independent Turkmenistan, Garryev stressed. This was due directly to Niyazov, who "introduced a new policy of national democracy" in last year's local elections, wherein typically four or five rivals contested seats. In Soviet days, there were single candidates, for whom everyone had to vote regardless. "I think we are following the right path."

4. (U) Responding to Adams' questions, Garryev replied that:

-- Campaign financing was 100 percent by the state. Funding support from private individuals, companies or other interests was banned;

-- While they presumably consulted with their "home" welayats in the process, the individual candidates were responsible for drawing up their own platforms;

-- There was no polling activity as such, Turkmenistan being "still a young democracy." Candidates' multiple meetings with voters around the country had been a fair substitute for tapping public attitudes;

-- The CEC approved 200 domestic election observers.

...But not up to International Standards

¶5. (SBU) Adams then observed that some aspects of the current election had aroused criticism abroad. If requested, the USG could offer assistance to remedy shortcomings so that future elections would satisfy such critics. "Criticisms from where?" was Garryev's reaction, "From those who know us or from those who just hear about us?" And what specific type of technical assistance was being offered? These presidential elections were a novel event in Turkmenistan's expanded democratic process, Garryev reiterated. Turkmenistan had the responsibility for conducting them without foreign aid. Problems might indeed transpire, but "judge us (only) when we've done it."

¶6. (SBU) Asked by another U.S. delegation member what electoral reforms the CEC plans between the presidential and next local elections, Garryev responded "What (additional) reforms can we conduct?" The very fact that the U.S. visitors were meeting with the CEC chairman showed Turkmenistan's electoral reform was already underway, he went on to assert. He then drew the metaphor of

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test-driving a brand-new car on the highway. Maybe the car would break down, but as long as it was going smoothly "why should the driver ask for help?" After several minutes of emphatic utterance along these lines, Garryev made a point of returning to a completely relaxed note. Once Turkmenistan's government had conducted and itself evaluated the February 11 polling, it would be open to considering U.S. observations and recommendations, he concluded.

Comment

¶7. (SBU) The CEC Chairman's performance from start to finish of this meeting reinforced refTel's tentative conclusion: However minimal the presence of true democracy in this election, Turkmenistan's post-Niyazov regime probably does consider that it is making good-faith gestures in the direction of "international electoral standards" and may be stung if the outside world does not give it credit for at least feebly distancing itself from previous worse practices. END COMMENT.

BRUSH